

Streaming Media Players

WITH ONLINE SERVICES such as Amazon, Hulu Plus, and Netflix, you can watch an entire season of a TV series in a few days or sample a new program every night. All you need is a smart TV or an Internet-connected device that can feed video to your set.

A streaming media player is a simple, inexpensive way to transform almost any TV into a media-streaming machine. Most of the players we've tested are small set-top boxes that connect to a TV via an HDMI input and to a home network via Wi-Fi. There are a few stick-style players that slip into a TV's HDMI slot. Most media players are \$35 to \$100 or so. Apple and Roku players are by far the best sellers, though Google's \$35 Chromecast is gaining ground.

Before you buy, make sure that a player you're considering supports the video and music services you'd like to use. Most models work with Netflix, but they might not carry other streaming services, such as HBO Go and Vudu. Some models can also stream content from other devices on your home network or even mirror the display from a compatible tablet, smart phone, or computer.

Wi-Fi connectivity is handy, but wired connections tend to be more robust, so look for a player with an Ethernet jack if your TV is near your modem or router. If you have an older TV without HDMI, get a model with analog video connections.



Apple TV, \$100

Roku Streaming Stick, \$50

Amazon Fire TV, \$100

Bargain

► **Google Chromecast, \$35**

The claim to fame for this tiny, affordable device is its ability to cast content from a computer's Chrome browser to a TV. Chromecast can also mirror content from an Android phone or tablet. It has added more content in the past year, including direct support for Google Play (Google Music, Google Video), HBO Go, Hulu Plus, Netflix, and YouTube. It still lacks Amazon, however. Chromecast plugs into a TV's HDMI input and gets power from the set's USB port or a wall outlet.

Sweet Spot

► **Roku 2, \$70**

This has a lot of what the pricier Roku 3 offers, including dual-band Wi-Fi and a remote with a headphone jack. It lacks a motion-sensing remote, a faster processor, and an Ethernet jack. Another option: the Roku Streaming Stick, \$50, which plugs into a TV's HDMI input. All three of these Rokus can cast personal media from a phone or tablet to a TV using the Roku app. The Streaming Stick and Roku 3 can also cast directly from the Netflix and YouTube apps and mirror the screen of an Android or Windows mobile device.

Splurge

► **Roku 3, \$100**

The Roku 3 is the top all-around player, with an easy-to-use interface, fast operation, and the most content of any tested player: Amazon Instant Video/Prime, HBO Go, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Vudu, and more. It has dual-band Wi-Fi for more reliable wireless connections and an Ethernet jack. It can cast personal media, Netflix and YouTube videos, and mirror the screen from a phone or tablet to a TV. Its remote has a headphone jack for private listening and a motion sensor that is used for gaming.

For Amazon Fans

► **Amazon Fire TV, \$100**

One of streaming media's newest contenders, Fire TV brings very fast operation and voice search to the party. It's the first media player that's a credible game platform, though you'll need the optional \$40 game controller. It's no surprise that Fire TV is optimized for Amazon's video services, but it also supports Netflix and several others. Voice search is nice, but in our tests of paid services it worked only with Amazon and Hulu Plus. Parents may like the parental controls and kids' area.

For Apple Devotees

► **Apple TV, \$100**

This is the must-have streaming media player for Apple fans who have lots of content on iTunes, on a Mac computer, or in Apple's iCloud. Apple TV has the company's super-friendly interface, and it integrates seamlessly with iTunes video and music libraries, as well as Apple's iCloud storage service. The device supports AirPlay mirroring, which displays whatever is on the screen of a Mac computer, iPad, iPhone, or iPod Touch on the television. The biggest drawback to Apple TV: It lacks Amazon and Vudu.

Ratings: Streaming Media Players

Scores in context: Of the 14 players tested, the highest scored 70; the lowest, 35. Listed below are the seven top-scoring models, in order of performance. All offer Wi-Fi connectivity.

CR Best Buy Recommended ● Excellent ● Very Good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

STREAMING MEDIA PLAYERS

Recommended	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE	TEST RESULTS				FEATURES	
					Picture Quality	Features	First-Time Setup	Everyday Use	Web Browser	Streaming Services
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Roku 3	\$100	70	●	●	●	○		A, B, HBO, HP, N, R, SHO, V
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Roku 2	\$70	68	●	●	●	○		A, B, HBO, HP, N, R, SHO, V
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Roku Streaming Stick (HDMI version)	\$50	68	●	●	○	○		A, B, HBO, HP, N, R, SHO, V
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Roku 1	\$50	67	●	●	●	○		A, B, HBO, HP, N, R, SHO, V
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Google Chromecast	\$35	65	●	●	●	●	●	GP, HBO, HP, N
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Amazon Fire TV	\$100	62	●	●	○	○		A, HP, N, SHO
	7	Apple TV (3rd gen.)	\$100	59	●	●	○	○		HBO, HP, IT, N

A=Amazon Instant Video, B=Blockbuster, GP=Google Play, HBO=HBO Go, HP=Hulu Plus, iT=iTunes, N=Netflix, R=Redbox Instant, SHO=Showtime Anytime, V=Vudu



WHAT TO BUY FOR A CABLE CUTTER

BLAKE WOOLSEY, 30
IT DIRECTOR, LIVE OAK, FLA.

"I want a media streamer for our second TV. Since cutting cable and going with an antenna, we mainly watch network TV, and we stream Netflix and Hulu Plus using a PS4 gaming console. I watch whatever sports I can using the antenna, but football is critical, so I get NFL Mobile Premium on my phone, through Verizon. (I'm a 49ers fan.)"



Consumer Reports Says
"If Blake simply wanted to watch Netflix shows, almost any streaming media player would do. But he's paying to watch NFL games—and I hate to think of him in a Patrick Willis jersey on Sundays, huddled over a 5-inch screen. The solution is Google Chromecast, \$35, which can mirror a phone display or Chrome Web browser on a TV."
—Christopher Andrade, streaming media tester

Sound Bars

MANY NEW TVs are enviably sleek, but the drawback to ever-slimmer sets is mediocre sound. You could remedy that with a pricey surround-sound system or a home theater in a box, but there's a simpler solution: a sound bar speaker. Sound bars are long, narrow speaker enclosures that you can place above or below a TV on a stand or wall mount. Many have a separate wireless subwoofer for bass. Prices range from less than \$200 to more than \$1,000.

TIP Many sound bars support Bluetooth, which enables you to use them as speakers for mobile devices. The ability to easily play music from your phone or tablet extends the value of a sound bar investment.

Bargain

► Vizio S3821W, \$160

Recommended for 40- to 46-inch TVs, this 40-inch-long sound bar will please your ears and your wallet with its very good sound and low price. It comes with a separate wireless subwoofer and uses Bluetooth to stream music from a phone or tablet.

ALSO CONSIDER

► Sharp HT-SB602, \$400

It provides very good sound and fits best with TVs 60 inches or larger. The piano-black enclosure and matching wireless subwoofer make an attractive pair. The speaker has built-in Bluetooth with NFC for easy pairing, and two HDMI inputs.

Sweet Spot

► Sonos Playbar, \$700

In addition to adding oomph to a TV's sound, this Wi-Fi sound bar can be teamed up with other Sonos speakers to form a multichannel surround-sound system in one room or become part of a multiroom system. You can stream audio from other devices or from Internet-based music services. An app turns a phone or tablet into a remote.

ALSO CONSIDER

► Atlantic Technology H-PAS PowerBar PB-235, \$600

This 2.1-channel-ready sound bar delivers very good audio with a clean, open sound. It has an output for a subwoofer, which isn't included.

Spurge

► Samsung HW-F850, \$1,000

Capable of very good sound, Samsung's 2.1-channel model has glowing vacuum tubes visible in a small window. It can be placed flat on a table or mounted upright on a wall; a sensor detects its orientation and adjusts the output and display. It has Bluetooth, NFC, and one HDMI input.

ALSO CONSIDER

► Sony HT-ST7, \$1,150

This elegant sound bar contains a 7-channel speaker array and has a wireless subwoofer. It has Bluetooth, NFC, and three HDMI inputs, so you can switch sources. It can decode 7.1-channel audio.